

The Dream Deferred: How “College and Career Readiness” Looks from Below

Bill Tucker

Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
wtucker@emich.edu



Apparently the current mission of secondary education in the United States is to prepare students for the next level of education, whatever that may be. The notion of “College and Career Readiness” is as amorphous as it sounds, and it overshadows the essential goals of the arts, humanities, and sciences. It dismisses the immediate relevance of learning and undermines the belief that success can be about current priorities and age-appropriate goals. Education is defined by what it can accomplish in the remote future, not in the present.

The drafted “Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies and Science,” currently offered as national benchmarks for K–12 education, builds on the shadowy notion of “College and Career Readiness” to the point that every grade’s standards are calibrated starting from the hypothetical knowledge of a student entering a postsecondary institution or career. As the introduction to the “Standards” claims, “Whether guiding third graders through a science unit or high school sophomores through a work of literature, teachers can look to the same CCR Standards—included in each section of this document—to help judge whether students are on course for being college or career ready” (1). This is the discourse of the “dream deferred.”

As much as the backward mapping of the curriculum can increase continuity over the span of K–12 education, it diverts the attention of both student and teacher from the immediate consequences of learning. Students should know the value of reading and writing in the present, so they are not forever prodded by deferred goals such as admission to the college of their choice.

The discourse of the dream deferred, rather than inspiring students to prepare for the future, often promotes disillusionment with the present. It could be blamed for increased dropout rates or declining test scores over the span of grades 7 through 12. Students become convinced of the irrelevance of secondary schooling, and that they are only *preparing* for life, rather than living. Every learning goal is seen through the prism of adulthood and how it will transform them into sophisticated and respectable citizens, displacing their shallow and futile adolescence.

High school teacher Tim Gillespie recalls a conversation with a favorite student about her frustrating college admission essay. She was agonizing about “how to impress the college admissions committee.”

“Well don’t worry about that,” I said offhandedly in our writing conference. “Just tell your story, get at the truth about who *you* are.” She looked at me, turned her head sideways, said “Oh,” then wiggled around for a couple more minutes before I realized she didn’t want to talk anymore, but to head off to the library to write. Later Katie told me it was a great day when she decided that, for a writer, it was more important to be honest than to sound smart. (18; italics in original)

The discourse of the dream deferred robbed the voice of the young adult writer. Katie should not have been imagining herself in an advanced stage of success in her writing. She should have been addressing her present questions and how they could change what she thought in the past. It is not so much a visionary goal for learning, but an active,

forceful approach that puts learning in a meaningful context.


I have heard myself tell high school students, “You’ll need to know this for college.” Usually it was something I disliked teaching as much as they disliked learning it. I have heard middle school teachers making the same claim about what their students should know for high school, and just recently I read that a fifth-grade teacher told her class, “‘This is how you research,’ and ‘This is how you cite sources,’ because ‘the students are expected to know how to write in these ways’ in junior high and high school” (qtd. in Whitney et al. 215). There are many meaningful reasons for giving credit to a source, but only one of them is for some future academic requirement. I imagine we could find examples of this kind of dream-deferred discourse up and down the educational ladder.

In Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem,” the dream is of success in America, but it is unattainable for certain classes and races for lack of opportunity. The humane American response to this injustice is to create opportunities. But another response is to frame dreams as intermediate goals, goals that make sense today, not only for the future. Katie had to frame her college essay about who she was at that moment, not about who she might be if she were admitted to the college of her choice. This wasn’t an impoverished goal for a struggling writer; it was a realistic goal for a superior writer. It was an expression of “now” that made sense to Katie, not a dream of “then,” with its imagined expectations.

The discourse of the dream deferred is almost as unrealistic for many secondary students as the American Dream can be for the underprivileged of society. It sets an ambivalent stance of living for the future and substitutes the affectation of learning for

genuine learning. It turns scholastic achievement into a random accumulation of artifacts of success. It makes imposters of students and teachers alike.

And like the discourse of the American Dream, the discourse of “College and Career Readiness” is vaunted by those who have already achieved it. It vindicates the haves against the insufficiency of the have-nots. Every day it reminds the have-nots of what they lack and how far the goal remains. In the guise of promising power, it highlights the imbalance of power. Student have-nots are compelled to labor for the future in the same way entry-level workers are compelled to endure substandard wages in hope of future promotion. Some are promoted; many are not.

The amorphous goal of “College and Career Readiness” may sound visionary, but it creates a kind of far-sightedness, in the optical sense of the word. We see clearly at a distance, but not so well the students and the age-appropriate goals in front of us. The Common Core State Standards are based on an imaginary college candidate or job applicant, not on the students we teach in the K–12 classroom. The discourse of the “dream deferred” distorts our vision of literacy and disheartens the students we actually teach. 

Works Cited

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Bill Tucker taught high school English for 20 years before going to Eastern Michigan University as a teacher educator. Since 1993 he has taught English methods classes and graduate classes in the teaching of English. Since 2000 he has been director of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project.

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